

**CALIFORNIA PERFORMANCE REVIEW COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARING ON EDUCATION, TRAINING AND VOLUNTEERISM**

**Testimony
For
Alex Ricciardulli**

September 9, 2004

Honorable Members of the Commission:

Thank you for inviting me to speak.

My name is Alex Ricciardulli, and I work in the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office. I have been an attorney for almost 17 years, and have devoted my entire professional career to public service. I defend indigent people charged with crimes, and teach students part-time at Loyola and U.S.C. I have also volunteered over the years for numerous groups; as of late I'm donating my time as a guest lecturer for Chicano Studies students and as a judge for moot court competitions.

I am a lawyer, a teacher, and a volunteer.

I strongly believe that the California Performance Review's proposal to require 16 hours of community service for public college students to graduate is an idea that is going to benefit both the state and the students who participate in the program.

I'm here to share with you some of my experiences on the impact of community service on people who are already regularly required to donate their time, namely jurors in our court system, and minor criminal offenders ordered to do community service as a condition of probation. Based on my interactions as a lawyer dealing with these individuals, I can tell you unequivocally that participants in these compulsory service programs hugely profit from their experiences.

Other panel members and speakers will be able to talk to you about the economics of the proposal and the equity of requiring students to perform service. I don't believe that it can be seriously doubted that the proposal will generate millions of dollars of service to the tremendous benefit of community groups statewide, and, given how much cheaper public colleges are than their private counter parts—\$6,000 a year for a top-of-the-line U.C. school as opposed to

\$30,000 per year for private schools like U.S.C. and Stanford—it's altogether fair to ask students to repay taxpayers in this small way by performing service.

I can tell you from my own experience as a volunteer the great satisfaction that is generated from donating your time to worthy causes. For years I was a member of the Junior Chamber of Commerce in Santa Monica. I participated in numerous events benefitting our community. We joined Heal the Bay and collected trash from beaches. We put on a "Peter Rabbit Day" where we did a free Easter egg hunt for disadvantaged neighborhood children with a floral auction the proceeds of which went to charity. We staffed the Santa Monica Boys and Girls' Club annual Haunted House, among many other activities.

Recently, I have donated my skills as an attorney by lecturing Cal. State Northridge Students in a Chicano Studies class about the 4th Amendment and search and seizure. I also take time off after work to be a judge in moot court practice for students at Loyola who annually participate in a national moot court competition. I was a volunteer host at a fundraiser in Los Feliz for the Los Angeles Police Foundation, an organization which helps victims' families and poor kids by giving them bicycles, blankets, and Christmas presents over the holidays. We generated over \$10,000 for the L.A. Police Foundation just on that event.

The gratitude I received from community groups, from college professors, and from L.A. Police for my efforts gave me great satisfaction. Especially with the Chicano Studies students, it allows me to serve as a role model and let them know that hard work and perseverance really pays off. I am a Latino, and when I came to this country I was nine years old, and I didn't speak a word of English. I regularly share the difficulties I had achieving my goals, and hopefully inspire students to hang in there.

You can get a hundred, a thousand similar stories from people who have volunteered service. They will all tell you how big a part of their life volunteerism represents to them.

But, what about if you are forced to serve? Would such a participant really get a similar dose of satisfaction? Would they improve and grow as a human being?

I want to share with you the examples of two groups in society who are currently forced to serve—jurors and people on probation—and let you know that

despite the compulsory nature of their service, these groups are invariably enriched by the experience.

Jury duty. The right to a jury of ones' peers is one of the most cherished freedoms that we enjoy in America. Its roots are in antiquity, and it's what sets us apart from even other countries in the Western World.

That's what a jury means to us practitioners and judges working in the system: it's the eloquent and humble voice of the community that roars and rectifies injustices. I served on a jury three years ago and found it a wonderful experience.

But, jury duty means an altogether different thing to the average citizen who receives a summons in the mail: it's like catching the plague!

Nonetheless, once in the jury box, once the solemnity of their service is explained by the judge and the lawyers in a case, you see a remarkable attitude shift. Jurors not only take their role seriously as the final arbiters of justice, but they actually enjoy their participation. I've spoken to countless jurors following trials I've conducted, and I can tell you that almost uniformly the jurors were glad they served.

Formal studies and polling on juror reactions to serving are consistent with my conclusions. Jurors referred to their participation as "interesting," "important" and "educational," even though they were required to participate.

Conceivably, an arrangement could be made with local courts to have students satisfy their community service duty by serving on juries. The fact remains that jury duty in many ways is far less convenient than the proposal's college service requirement: students will be able to pick and choose the time for their service, whereas when you go in front of the judge for jury duty, you need a bonafide excuse or hardship to reschedule your duty. The point is that hundreds of thousands of our citizens every week are forced to serve, and they get satisfaction through the process.

The other compulsory service story I want to share with you is community service for criminal offenses as a condition of probation. I'm a criminal defense attorney, but I have no illusions of the typical offender: criminals try not to get caught doing their crime, and once caught would rather not do time, whether in jail or a community service assignment.

Also, community service as a punishment for an offense isn't for everyone. There are people who because of their current offense or background are totally unsuited for community service. Lord knows that as desperate as community groups are for laborers, they don't want some of these people anywhere near them and their charitable organizations.

But, for individuals whom the judge and prosecutor have determined are non-dangerous, trustworthy, and amenable to rehabilitation, community service is often a Godsend. An intangible impact of service for these people is it many times leads to paying employment with the service provider once the person's duty to the court is complete. Even if it's not with the same agency with whom they performed their service, sometimes the skills they acquired on probation allow the people to get paying work elsewhere.

Community service for these people also sensitizes them to the needs of a neighborhood. It gives them insight and contact with individuals that are often even worse off than they are. It creates empathy for their fellow human beings, making them less likely to victimize society in the future. Regardless of their reservations when they are first caught up in the system, compulsory service opens new worlds and enriches the lives of even people who have transgressed the state's laws.

Public college students are not criminals, and they wouldn't be treated as such by requiring them to do service. The amount of time they are expected to donate—16 total hours per pupil—comes out to about one-half an afternoon per semester for a student earning a four-year degree. This is but a fraction of the average amount of time an offender performs. Even petty thieves, drug addicts, and other neer-do-wells get something out of service, and so would students.

Let me conclude by saying that the proposal to make community service mandatory for college students is definitely supported by real world examples. The track record of the compulsory service models I've discussed point to a great likelihood of success if the proposal is adopted. The other models also show that in addition to the savings to the state and benefits to community groups, the participants will probably be the biggest winners in this picture.

Thank you once again for allowing me to participate.